BOOK REVIEW

Roman Historical Drama. The Octavia in Antiquity and Beyond. By PATRICK KRAGE-
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The *Octavia* is the single surviving exemplar of the genre of Roman histori-
cal drama, and has stirred centuries of debate around its authorship, its
time and purpose of composition, and its genre. Kragelund's book offers
a compelling, well-informed interpretation of the long-standing riddles posed by
the this text: the hope of definitive solutions is admittedly misplaced, but Krage-
lund's thorough examination of the evidence concerned, supported by a long se-
ries of personal studies on the subject (5), provides explanations that are, beyond
plausible, very convincing. He departs from conventional commentaries and con-
textualizes the play within the history and development of Roman historical
drama, to join the increasing number of scholars who have recently challenged the
enduring interpretation of Roman theatre as a downgraded version and often pro-
saic reproduction of the Greek. The threefold arrangement of the materials in the
tradition of the Roman genre of *fabulae praetextae* (3–126), the analysis of the
drama itself (129–360), and its reception in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century
European theatre (363–419), reflects the critic's concern with the *Octavia* not
only as a drama per se, but as representative of Roman theatrical traditions and of
Roman culture at large.

By a careful examination of the scant evidence on Roman *praetextae* (usefully
summarized in Table 2.1), Kragelund reconstructs the history of this distinctively
Roman genre from as early as Naevius in the third century BC, with sample discus-
sions of Accius' *Brutus* (46–52) and *Decius* (53–57), down to Lucius Cornelius
Balbus, Pollio's subaltern in the governance of Spain in the late 40s BC, and to early
imperial dramatists such as Pomponius Secundus and the controversial Curiatus
Maternus (109–110). Kragelund's main argument is a challenge to the notion of
(1) a disappearance of *praetextae* after the late Republic—he explains the odd pre-
vailing distribution of the evidence in the early republican time with the antiquar-
ian interests of the sources from late antiquity (*contra*: Peter L. Schmidt, *ANRW*
II.32.2 (1985): 1424; recently Gesine Manuwald, *Roman Republican Theatre*,
2011: 141); and (2) an eclipse of staged drama in favor of recitations or partial

performances by the second half of the first century AD., upheld by Ludwig Friedländer's still influential, albeit "incomplete and, at points, seriously slanted" (97) *Darstellungen aus der Sittengeschichte Roms in der Zeit von August bis zum Ausgang der Antonine.*

Rather than a puzzling solution of continuity, Kragelund advances the hypothesis of an evolution of the genre according to the changing political and cultural scenario at the turn of the first century AD. As historical drama shifted from a public commemorative display of *res gestarum Romanorum* on the occasion of religious *ludi* to 'partisan stagings' at the time of the civil wars (60–68), so private recitations among the ruling elite came to be an alternative to, but by no means altogether replacing, public staged performance. Along with unimpeachable first- and second-century literary (Quintilian, Seneca, Pliny, Tacitus) and epigraphic evidence of ongoing theatrical practices, the *Octavia* stands to witness generic continuity.

In subject, style, and language the play is in fact "emphatically Roman" (133), where toponyms, the understanding of social hierarchy, and the value system are unmistakably those of imperial Rome, in connection with previous *praetextae*. Likewise, the characters' portrayal is historically accurate and responds to the reality of Nero's time. Seneca's confrontation with Nero in Act I is steeped in the philosopher's own thought and famously rewrites, as it were, the De Clementia (217–230). The appearance of Agrippina's ghost in Act II seems to fulfill historical rumors about her avenging fury (Suet. *Nero* 34.4), all the more vicious in the face of the power Nero had initially conferred on her (239–248). But of course the entrance of a ghost was a long-standing strategy of ancient tragedy and confirms the Octavia's relationship to the genre; Kragelund repeatedly emphasizes the importance of the text as a script, its tragedy-like tripartite temporal structure (against the two-day structure: Rolando Ferri. *Octavia. A Play Attributed to Seneca.* Cambridge 2003; Anthony Boyle. *Octavia.* Oxford 2008), and the careful changes of settings that implied awareness of stage practices (chapter 9).

In contrast especially with Ferri (2003), the detailed analysis of each scene's dramatic expedients, language, and style (chapters 11–15) shows the unquestionable interaction between the visual and the narrative, and the drama's performativity. In the last section of Part II, Kragelund exploits to the full his knowledge of epigraphy, numismatic and art when discussing the much-debated issue of "The Time of Writing" (297-360) which, admittedly, more than proposing a convincing solution reconsiders the evidence involved to reject the idea of a dramatist working from written sources long after Nero's fall (cf. esp. Ferri 2003).

Finally, the influence of the Octavia in modern theatre confirms—Kragelund argues— that the play was intended for the stage: the opening scene of the protagonist relating her dream to a confidante became almost canonical for Italian, and later European, Renaissance tragedy, an approach otherwise "never found in extant Greek tragedy" (385).

Kragelund's book makes a welcome and necessary addition to the two recent commentaries on the *Octavia* by Rolando Ferri and Anthony Boyle, and to the study of ancient dramaturgy and the history of ancient theatre. The investigation of both the origins and the afterlife of this drama speaks in a very engaging but overall accessible manner to a wide audience in the field of Roman literature, history, theatre, and reception studies.

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